AN ADDRESS

FROM THE

ANNUAL ASSEMBLY

TO

THE CHURCHES,

ON THE

EXERCISE OF REASON IN MATTERS OF RELIGION.

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AN ADDRESS, &c.

DEAR BRETHREN,

WE live at a time when the views of men on religious subjects are carried to the greatest extremes. On the one hand, reason continues to be decried by many professors of the Gospel, as if the exercise of it had no place in religion, as if faith must be built on its ruins, or at least, that we must believe what reason can neither comprehend nor approve! On the other hand, infidelity is openly avowed by many, and the empire of reason is attempted to be established on the ruins of revealed religion. There is certainly some medium between these dangerous extremes: if reason and revelation be both gifts of God, they must be consistent with each other; and the true medium seems to lie in the full and free exercise of reason, while we make the Gospel the rule of our faith and practice, and give a rational exposition of its contents; nor need we be reduced to the said dilemma of either sacrificing our reason, or doubting the truth of the gospel, which is the ground of our immortal hope, and a never-failing source of consolation!

God hath made us rational creatures, and it is impossible he should require us to act inconsistently with the nature he hath given us: in every thing we should act as rational creatures. Reason is to be numbered among the most precious of his gifts: it is a gift we are bound highly to prize, and diligently to improve. It is that faculty which (whether different in nature, or only possessed in a vastly superior degree, to what we call instinct in other creatures) gives man a glorious pre-eminence above the beasts that perish. So far as we lay aside the use of reason, we sink ourselves in the scale of being, we degrade ourselves to a level with the brutes, and ungratefully and basely throw away one of the best gifts of heaven; at least like that slothful servant we hide our talent, and let it remain unoccupied. God hath given us each of our senses to be used to his glory, for our own benefit, and the good of others; but reason

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is a more excellent gift than any one of the senses, and surely it cannot be given to be unemployed. Shall it be said that reason is to be used in the meaner concerns of life, and to be laid aside in the most momentous, in the important affairs of religion? The supposition is manifestly absurd. The noblest powers ought above all to be employed in the most important matters—those which relate to God and a Future life.

In attempting to establish and explain the use of reason in matters of religion, let us guard against misconception. When we contend for the free exercise of reason, too many either cannot or will not understand us. They cry out against us as persons who exalt human nature, and depreciate the scriptures. But let us not be frightened by noise and declamation. What, can we not be humble without undervaluing and despising that noble gift by which the Almighty hath made us more excellent than the beasts of the field? Must one of the divine gifts, either reason or revelation, be depreciated, that the other may be exalted? Do we set reason in opposition to revelation? By no means. They are both gifts of the same God, and are in perfect harmony with each other. Reason can discover nothing that is contrary to revealed truth, nor does revelation contain any thing contrary to reason. Far be it from us to set reason above revelation; nor do we depreciate revelation by contending for the free exercise of reason in matters of religion. The utmost discoveries of mere reason fall far short of what the Gospel reveals. When men had departed from what was known of God by the light of nature, and fallen into polytheism and idolatry, reason, unaided by revelation, was found insufficient to recover them to the knowledge and worship of the only true God. The doctrine of a Future life, and the way to attain it, mere reason could not discover, with any degree of certainty. In reference to this all-important subject, reason was found an inadequate teacher and guide. We no more diminish the value of divine Revelation, by saying that without the use of reason its saving benefits cannot be enjoyed, than we diminish the value of that heavenly luminary the sun, by saying, that a man cannot enjoy its light without using his eyes. In vain would the light discover objects if men had not eyes to behold them; and in vain would the important doctrines of Revelation be made known, if man had not rational powers to perceive and understand them. Most absurdly would that man be thought to act, who should call upon his fellow-creatures to shut their eyes that they might see objects aright; but not more absurdly than those who contend that reason, the eye of the mind, must

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be disused in judging of the truths of revelation: yet such absurdity has too often disgraced the professors of Christianity.

If man had not reason he could have no religion, he would be incapable of moral consciousness. None but rational creatures can be the subjects of religion. Infants, idiots, and maniacs, are incapable of religion and of moral actions. Human laws never treat them as moral agents—evidently because they have not the use of reason: and those who relinquish the use of reason level themselves with infants, idiots, and maniacs; but as they do it voluntarily, in them it is criminal, which is not the case with the others. Without we use our reason, the visible creation will not lead us to discover the Eternal Power and Godhead, nor to perceive that the heavens declare the glory of God, and that the earth is full of his riches! Natural religion results from the exercise of reason on the works of God. To lay aside the exercise of reason in matters of religion, is a step towards atheism; for through what other faculty can the marks of design, legible throughout the creation, by which the existence of God is fully proved, be clearly discerned?

There seems to be an universal consciousness that reason must be exercised in order to man's becoming religious: there are some few exceptions, but they are found only where the conscience is perverted by error and superstition. Hence it is common, everywhere, when persons wish to bring others to pay a proper regard to God and morality, for them to urge the necessity of their seriously reflecting and thinking within themselves; but to reflect and think, implies the exercise of reason: and those who would bring others to proper thought and reflection, always feel it necessary to reason with them.

If men had not reason, they could not receive a divine Revelation; because they could neither judge of its evidences, nor understand its contents. The Gospel is not sent to beasts, birds, fishes, and insects, nor is it adapted to them: And why is it not? evidently because they are not rational creatures: but if reason is not to be used in matters of religion, man is, so far as relates to divine revelation, in a state similar to those creatures; for reason makes no difference if its exercise is to be laid aside when we attend to the scriptures. To be without reason, and not to use it, places us in the same state, with this difference, that in the latter case we are highly criminal.

Without the exercise of reason, it is impossible we should have that faith which stands, not in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God. We may indeed become the disciples of men, we may believe implicitly; but cannot be the genuine

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disciples of Christ: we cannot have that faith which is of the operation of God. For how can we know that the scriptures contain a divine revelation, any more than the Koran, or the pretended sacred books of the Hindoos: How can we judge of either the external or internal evidences of such a revelation, but as we exercise our reason on these subjects? How can we distinguish real from false miracles, or genuine from spurious prophecies, or a true from a false testimony, or a religion which is of divine origin from a system of imposture, but as we use our reason to judge and discriminate? Indeed we cannot stir a single step, with safety, in the sacred paths of religion, without our reason. Lay aside the exercise of reason, and you are liable to become the dupes of every impostor, to be led into every error, to be wrapt up in enthusiasm, and thus bewildered, like men wandering in the dark, to stumble on without knowing whither you are going. In short, if you lay aside the use of reason, you must proceed blindly in matters of infinite importance, and will be liable to fall a prey to the most fatal snares and evils.

It is impossible you should understand the scriptures any further than you exercise your reason on their contents.—Among the contradictory interpretations of passages, the clashing systems, and multifarious opinions, which men build upon the sacred writings, you will not know what to believe, nor what to practise; but be filled with darkness and perplexity, unless you use your reason in searching the scriptures, and judging for yourselves: either you will be tossed about with every wind of doctrine, or become the bigotted devotees of a party; but if you exercise your reason in a sober and steady manner, on the divine testimony, which in all its leading doctrines and important duties is plain to the simple-hearted, you will be relieved from painful uncertainty respecting both truth and duty, your faith will be increased, your hope confirmed; and as you obey the truth, and your love abound more and more, your joy in the Lord will be great.

We are taught, both by precept and example, in the holy scriptures, to exercise our reason in all matters of religion. The prophet Samuel said to the people of Israel, "Stand still, that I may reason with you before the Lord, of all the righteous acts of the Lord." 1 Sam. xii. 7. Jehovah called upon his people to use their reason; "Come, now," saith he, "and let us reason together." Isa. i. 18. Again, "O inhabitants of Jerusalem, and men of Judah, judge, I pray you, betwixt me and my vineyard." Chap. v. 3. And again, "O house of Israel, are

not my ways equal?" Ezek. xviii. 29. Jehovah himself would not call upon his creatures to use their reason, appeal to that reason respecting the equity of his ways, and intreat them to judge of his conduct, which they could not do without exercising their reason, if he did not approve of their exercising reason in matters of religion. The apostles of Jesus made use of reason in publishing the gospel. We are told, "Paul, as his manner was, went in unto them, (the Jewish assembly) and three sabbath days reasoned with them out of the scriptures." Acts xvii. 2. "And he reasoned in the synagogue every sabbath." Chap. xviii. 4. Before Felix, "he reasoned of righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come." Chap. xxiv. 25. Had the use of reason in matters of religion been improper, Paul would not have allowed himself in the constant use of it when dispensing divine truth. The apostles also called upon their fellow-christians to use their reason. Paul said, "I speak as to wise men; judge ye what I say." 1 Cor. x. 15. "Prove all things." 1 Thess. v. 21. Peter says, "Be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you." 1 Pet. iii. 15. Let us be determined, in conformity to the advice and example of the holy apostles, to exercise our reason freely in matters of religion, let who will, after the example of the mother of harlots, who is branded in the prophetic page with the epithet mystery, renounce the use of reason for unintelligible dogmas. Christ himself taught the sufficiency of reason to judge of what God reveals, when he said to the Jews, "Yea, and why even of yourselves judge ye not what is right?" Luke xii. 37. That the gospel requires nothing but what is reasonable, Paul taught, when he said, "Present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service." Rom. xxii. 1. The apostle apprehended no danger from men who would use their reason; it was from *unreasonable* men he wished to be delivered. 2 Thess. iii. 2.

If there be nothing in religion contrary to reason, nothing unreasonable, it follows that there is no subject in religion but what reason may be exercised upon. Still, we shall be told that the scriptures contain doctrines which are above reason.—To this it may be replied, that what is above reason can be no part of revelation; for the word revelation is only applicable to things which are made known; consequently, which are brought down to a level with our reason, and may be comprehended, as what is not brought on a level with our rational powers, is no revelation to us. Did the gospel really contain doctrines above

reason, it would, so far, cease to be a divine revelation, and with such incomprehensible mysteries we should have nothing to do; for secret things belong unto the Lord, and what is above our reason must necessarily be a secret to us, but revealed things belong to us and our children. We may safely conclude, that the gospel, as it was preached to, and intended for the poor, as it is a revelation to babes in knowledge, contains no mysterious and incomprehensible doctrines. Still, it will be argued we must believe doctrines which we cannot understand. To this it is replied, the thing is impossible; we may assent to what we do not understand; we may say we believe it, but we cannot really believe it, because we know not what it is; for we cannot know what we do not understand; and if we say we believe what we do not understand, we in fact say we believe we know not what; and how, in that case, are we either to explain or give a reason for what we believe? If a man should say he believes there is a God, but understands not how God exists; that he believes the dead will be raised, but he understands not how they will be raised; it will be easy to reply, that he does not believe how God exists, nor how the dead will be raised, that his faith is limited to the part of each subject which he understands; for he understands that God exists, and that the dead will be raised; and it extends not to the part of either subject of which he remains ignorant.

It may be asked, how far the exercise of reason is to be extended in matters of religion. It is answered, to every subject which relates either to faith or practice. No subject ought to be deemed too sacred to be brought to the test of reason. Truth does not shun the light, and least of all divine truth. It can suffer no loss, but will derive advantage from the severest scrutiny. It is error that sculks into corners, robes itself in mystery, shrinks from the touch of reason, and is revered only because it is not brought to the ordeal. When the friends of truth would withhold any part of it from the scrutiny of reason, they injure the cause they espouse, and dishonour truth by their unnecessary fears. Either reason is to be used in judging of every doctrine and practice in religion, or it cannot be proved lawful to use it on any religious subject. How can it be proved that transubstantiation ought to be brought to the test of reason, and not the doctrine of the trinity, of hereditary depravity, of infant baptism, and of satisfaction for sins? Yes, each of these, and every other assumed doctrine of revelation, ought to be brought to the scrutiny of reason. Let those who cry out against reason, lay it entirely aside, and then see how they will

be able to proceed. They will find themselves incapable of arguing in defence of any religious doctrine or practice; for to bring arguments from the scriptures, or elsewhere, is to reason. If the use of reason in matters of religion was laid aside, nothing would remain but dogmatism, implicit faith, and blind superstition.

The laying aside the exercise of reason in matters of religion, has been productive of great and manifold evils. At this door the greatest corruptions of Christianity entered. This made way for the gross superstition and abominations of popery, and gradually gave birth to the most absurd of all maxims, that ignorance is the mother of devotion. Had not the exercise of reason been laid aside, Christians could never have been induced to receive as articles of faith what they were incapable of understanding, nor to have substituted inexplicable mysteries and senseless forms, in the place of the simple doctrines and ordinances of Jesus Christ. Had not the exercise of reason in matters of religion been revived, the corruptions of Christianity could not have been detected and exploded, nor the Reformation ever have been commenced. Had not the Baptists at that time, in Poland, and some other countries, exercised their reason more freely than their contemporaries, they would not have excelled, as they really did, the most celebrated of the Reformers in the detection of long established errors, and the discovery of the most important and long despised doctrines of truth; they would not have sown those seeds which promise to produce a more abundant harvest in our day. It is only by resolutely persevering in the free exercise of reason on every subject in religion, while we continue a humble and diligent attention to the scriptures, and maintain a holy conversation, that we can hope to carry forward the work of reformation, until error and superstition be banished from the earth, and the pure Gospel every where prevail. Let us be content to be reproached and despised for maintaining equally the cause of reason and revelation. It was for using their reason in opposition to the dogmas and irrational notions of popish priests, the protestant martyrs suffered. The popish doctors, when they contended for transubstantiation, had the words of scripture on their side, if they might be allowed to apply them without any regard to reason; but the Protestants asserted that their application of them was contrary to reason, and they perished gloriously, in the flames, rather than give up the free exercise of reason in matters of religion. We beseech you therefore, brethren, by the noble example of so many sufferers, that you never desist from the free exercise of reason on every subject in religion.

The setting reason and revelation in opposition to each other, and maintaining irrational doctrines under the Christian name, has thrown open the flood-gates of infidelity, and filled the mouths of unbelievers with arguments. They are sure, reason is the gift of the Creator, and conclude, that if revelation be inconsistent with reason, or contain doctrines that are not rational, it never could proceed from the same source. If revelation was what such men suppose it, and what too many of its professed friends have represented it to be, their conclusion would be just, and their argument against the scriptures irresistible; but we have no fears on this head—reason and revelation are in perfect agreement; and let it be our study, for the honour and success of the gospel, to do all we can to make it appear that Christianity is a reasonable service.

It has sometimes happened, that men have been so unreasonable as to reason against the exercise of reason in matters of religion; but such men most evidently confute themselves; for they justify by their practice what they condemn, as themselves exercise reason, however improperly, at the time, and attempt to make reason a suicide. In the nature of things, it is impossible that any reason should be advanced against the use of reason; every attempt of the kind is mere sophistry. Those who declaim the most against reason, always use it as an auxiliary when it suits their purpose; which proves that they are never against reason, only when they feel that reason is against them. Much has been said about carnal reason; but the expression is self-contradictory: for reason is not a mere animal, but a rational principle; and those who use the expression mean the reason of those who differ from them merely, forgetting that their own reason is as much human, consequently as much carnal as that of other men.

Now, Brethren, our prayer is, that as individuals and as Churches you may be guided by reason and scripture in all your proceedings; that you may be blessed with peace, and built up in the faith and hope of the gospel.

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